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Communities, Change and the Covid-19 crisis

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The Covid-19 crisis is having a significant impact on the museum sector, nationally and globally. The immediate impact for many UK museums and arts organisations was a loss of income, closure of galleries, school visits cancelled, and projects on hold, while thousands of staff were furloughed, thus exposing the vulnerability of museums, their staff, projects and collections. Looking elsewhere, new programming, developed at short notice has demonstrated the vitality and versatility of an engaged, responsive and participatory museum service, proving that museums are places of relevance even in a crisis. This time of unprecedented change might be seen as an opportunity for innovation, but it should also be looked upon as an occasion to pause for reflection and to consider the complexity of our audiences. Coinciding with Covid-19, we saw rapid progress of the Black Lives Matter movement which has, quite rightly, challenged us to acknowledge racism in our society and in our institutions. If we can use the pause enforced upon us by Covid-19, one of the outcomes should be to address what we really want from our cultural institutions in light of inequality and injustice. In this insight piece I demonstrate how a responsive and reactive community-focussed museum service can become the start of broader reform. We are not yet out of the crisis, and with time more data will emerge enabling other forms of analysis. However, for now, salient points can usefully inform museum futures.

Community engagement during lockdown

With doors only just beginning to open and social distancing likely to change or even risk projects built around co-production with community partners, museums are adapting to maintain relevance. An Art Fund report on the impact of Covid-19 in England resonates with similar UK and international studies, showing that the pandemic is raising questions about every aspect of museum work, including:

The future of collections and exhibition programming; the agile and adaptable digital skills and infrastructure needed to open up collections and reach audiences now and the future; how to encourage visitors to return once museums reopen and the practical and financial challenges that accompany social distances in museums; and how to support an expert and passionate workforce through a period of continued uncertainty. (Sarah Philip, Director of Programme and Policy, Art Fund 2020:3)¹

In Northern Ireland institutions quickly turned to recording the lockdown. Amongst others, Newry and Mourne Museum is inviting residents to share a story of 'Living in Lockdown', and the Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum launched a contemporary collecting project 'Covid-19 and Me' as citizen curatorship. These projects succeeded because they were building on established community networks. Loyal

followers arising from effective community collaboration pre-Covid became the first point of call when the museum was facing a potential crisis as a result of closing. Tower Museum, Derry/Londonderry, developed and launched its first website, exploiting the increased digital appetite that is ‘opening up many new possibilities for the public to engage with our collections’.² Fermanagh County Museum built a new following on social media with ‘Guess the Mystery Object’. The latter may seem too unsophisticated to trigger significant change; however, in reality, the simplicity seemed appropriate during a pandemic. These lesser known artefacts became the stimulus for social media conversations with the museum and amongst households. They also provided a draw for frequent visitors familiar with objects commonly on display. Impressions on Twitter increased 15-fold between January and May 2020 and created an appetite to visit the museum post-lockdown.³

INSERT IMAGES HERE

Figures 1 and 2: Graphics produced by Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum, Northern Ireland, to represent their new Covid-19 projects (reproduced with permission from ILCLM)

Other museums with community projects that were stalled as a result of closure found that they couldn’t necessarily go digital. When The Glucksman, County Cork, planned restarting the Creative Aging project ‘Tales of the City’ remotely, its participants rejected the idea. For this senior group, participating in the same project from home had little appeal, because the social experience of meeting at the museum was key.⁴ Elsewhere in The Glucksman, family audiences engaged with a new ‘Creativity at Home’ initiative that has received international recognition for digital innovation during lockdown.⁵ Judith McCarthy, Curator of Donegal County Museum, found they could continue some aspects of an EU-funded PEACE IV project, focusing on building positive community relations among young people, because the participants were already digitally literate. However, she is concerned that members of their older audiences, who may continue to cocoon, will not re-engage with the museum – prevented by the poor broadband in remote locations.⁶

In all of these cases, the pay-off is potentially mutual: museums are demonstrating loyalty to audiences hoping it will be reciprocated in the difficult coming months when these audiences should be the museums’ most effective advocates.

Embracing change

Swift adaptation to the needs of communities has told us we can transform our practices should it be necessary. Rather than avoiding or fearing change, we need to demand even more. We should use the fact that nothing is currently as it was to find out what it can be. A significant part of the experience of the past few months is the Black Lives Matter movement. Whether participating in marches, or at home watching them unfold – for once the world’s attention has been focused on the Black experience. Hilary Carty, in her keynote address to the Association of Independent Museums (UK) first virtual conference

in June 2020, reminded the hundreds of people assembled on Zoom that racism is highly prevalent, and it is in our UK institutions. She advises, 'it will take all of us, black and white, to shift change'.⁷ Resulting from the Black Lives Matter protests there have been calls from museum activists for greater change in our museums.⁸ Following protests, the Museum of London Docklands finally removed the statue of Robert Milligan, a prominent British slave trader, 'that had stood uncomfortably outside' the museum for years.⁹ The museum staff was keenly aware of the statue's problematic background, but the momentum of the protests gave the museum the agency to act.¹⁰

For many, a consequence of the combined impact of Black Lives Matter movement, the pandemic, and further austerity on the horizon is a need to revisit museum purposes as well as their roles in the community. These issues and more were exposed at the Museums Association Coronavirus Conversation *Future of our Workforce* (17 June 2020). At this forum, Sara Wajid, Head of Engagement at the Museum of London, reminded us that the museum sector will need to ask 'what value are we adding to society ... What is the museum of the 21st century really here for'. She emphasised, 'we cannot dodge these questions anymore because financially we will not be allowed to'.¹¹ Heledd Fychan, Head of Policy and Public Affairs at National Museum Wales, suggested the sector uses being closed as an opportunity to look again at our institutions and how they serve their publics. She advised 'reopening is not just about chasing visitor numbers, we need to ask what is our purpose when we re-open'. She proposes we go even further, stating 'it would be a huge disservice to our communities if we don't challenge ourselves about what we have learnt as museums during this time'. It is her opinion that museums need to find out 'what people have really valued about us' and 'ask why they have still connected with us, what have they missed [while museums have been closed] ... Are there things we should be doing differently to support people?'. This dialogue and reflection, Fychan argues, has opportunity to generate a 'shared vision of the sector'.¹² These repeated calls from leaders to use this moment to strengthen community engagement suggests continuing unease in the sector and recognition of a lack of agreement around museum purposes. The division around the ICOM definition of a museum in late 2019, demonstrates the passions held in the sector for defending an idea of the museum and, by the same count, progressing it. Nevertheless, if the key to a museum's survival – its agency - is its audience, then agreement around purpose and relevance is critical. There is no doubt that this sector is prepared to innovate. Nevertheless, the debates in online museum forums indicate that this innovation needs to go further. There is evidence of frustration with the vulnerability of some aspects of museum work, such as outreach; this is alongside annoyance that it takes a pandemic for the culture sector to realise the potential of digital engagement. These arguments suggest that real change in museums is lagging behind the digital and activist movements documented in museum debates and practitioner conferences.

With the OECD saying the global economy is on a ‘tightrope’,¹³ it is anticipated that museum sector incomes and workforce will reduce. Despite this outlook, a mantra of ‘building back better’ is emerging,¹⁴ with the arts, heritage and museum sectors coming together with an open mind to explore what the future might look like. To minimise the long-term damage, this must be a partnership-led sector, linking cognate skills with a vision for change. There will be value in exploring new partnerships, bringing fresh thinking and a renewed commitment to social justice to established practices. Furthermore, we need to get even closer to our communities, demonstrating new ways museums have value and impact in a world going through major change. The implication of the first six months of 2020 is clear: we have just experienced a sweeping change to the practicalities of how we work; we should now extend that to a radical rethinking of our museum purposes and desired impacts.

¹ *Covid-19 Impact. Museum Sector Research Findings* 28 May 2020. Available at <https://www.artfund.org/assets/downloads/art-fund-covid19-research-report-final.pdf>

² *Tower Museum release new online Maritime Heritage Collections* Press Release 27 July 2020.

³ January 2020 the Fermanagh Museum Twitter account made 27,000 impressions, at the peak in May 2020 this figure was 410,000; a 6-fold increase was seen on Facebook. Every guess/response got a personal reply, building the community connection (Bronagh Cleary, Pers. Comm. 12 August 2020).

⁴ See more about the project here: <http://www.glucksman.org/projects/tales-of-a-city>

⁵ University College Cork, Press Release 22 July 2020 <https://www.ucc.ie/en/news/the-glucksman-receives-international-recognition-for-pandemic-lockdown-initiative.html>

⁶ Points drawn from contributions to Irish Museums Association online coffee break *Connecting Communities: Beyond the Digital* 27 May 2020. Contributors were Tadhg Crowley, Senior Curator: Education & Community, The Glucksman Cork; Judith McCarthy Donegal County Museum; Maria Cagney Hunt Museum Limerick.

⁷ Hilary Carty, Executive Director, Clore Leadership, *Leading in our time*. 18 June 2020. Available at <https://www.aim-museums.co.uk/virtual-conference/>

⁸ *Museum activists say real change needed to combat racial injustice* (Museums Association News 8 June 2020). Available at <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/museum-activists-real-action-racial-injustice>

⁹ Museum of London *Robert Milligan statue statement*, Press Release 9 June 2020. Available at <https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/news-room/press-releases/robert-milligan-statue-statement#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20statue%20of%20Robert%20Milligan,of%20the%20transatlantic%20slave%20trade.>

¹⁰ Sara Wajid *Coronavirus Conversations: Future of Our Workforce*, 17 June 2020. Available at <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/17062020-coronavirus-conversations-future-of-our-workforce>

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Heledd Fychan *Coronavirus Conversations: Future of Our Workforce*, 17 June 2020. Available at <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/17062020-coronavirus-conversations-future-of-our-workforce>

¹³ OECD Economic Outlook June 2020. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/economic-outlook/june-2020/>

¹⁴ OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19) Building back better: A sustainable, resilient recovery after COVID-19 5 June 2020 <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/building-back-better-a-sustainable-resilient-recovery-after-covid-19-52b869f5/>